

My Story

Constance Copeland Kvasnicka

This book was created as part of *Lifescapes*, a life writing project sponsored by the Nevada Humanities Committee, the Washoe County Library System, and the Department of English, University of Nevada, Reno.

Copyright © 2003
Constance Copeland Kvasnicka

Lifescapes

Frandsen Humanities Press
Department of English
University of Nevada
Reno, Nevada

MY STORY



Dad and Mom; Connie, Virginia, and Jim

I was lucky to be born into a wonderful family in Hutchinson, Kansas, on March 12, 1930. My family consisted of my mother, father, and my sister Virginia who was almost two when I was born. My brother Jim was born four years later. We lived in Hutchinson for my first six years.

We moved to Great Bend, Kansas, when I was 7 years old. Great Bend (so-named because it is situated on the great bend of the Arkansas River) was a boomtown at that time. Oil had been discovered in the surrounding territory and the population of Great Bend was growing. The town ultimately reached a population of about 23,000. I think the population was somewhere between ten and fifteen thousand when we moved there. Oil field workers and suppliers were moving in every day. We moved there because Dad had a chance to be in business for himself. He had worked for Standard Oil Company in

Hutchinson, but in Great Bend he would be a Standard Oil Bulk agent. He delivered gasoline to service stations and to farmers and others who needed it.

Housing was at a premium. Mom and Dad complained about having to spend \$45 per month to rent a house. That was considered exorbitant at that time. The house was located at 1617 Jefferson Street and had much to commend it. It was just one block from a brand new elementary school (E.E. Morrison School). There I attended second and third grades. Even better than the school location was the fact that the neighborhood had several kids my age. Buford Bissell lived next door on one side of us and Jacalin Lanterman lived on the other side. They were both in my grade at school. Mary Lou Hammond lived across the street. She was one year younger than I was. Bob Beeman lived in the next block and he was in my grade at school. He achieved a

dubious kind of fame in the neighborhood when he was injured by a firecracker on the Fourth of July and lost an eye. After that, he had a glass eye. This was my first experience with a tragic happening.

Because of the housing shortage in Great Bend, we rented our basement to a family named Kiger for a short time. The only thing I can remember about the family is that they had three daughters named Arlene, Erlene, and Nutalene.

During these years, there were several features of our house that we kids enjoyed. First-we had a shed in the back yard. This was reason enough to form a neighborhood club. I declared myself to be president, and who could argue with that idea? The shed (aka clubhouse) was in my backyard. Another feature of our neighborhood was an alley. This was a great place to play "flower shop". We gathered weeds and a few flowers and set up shop. Other pastimes included playing dolls, "exploring" the neighborhood, and the usual games that kids play.

We lived in the house on Jefferson for two years—my second and third grade years in school. Then we moved to a house across town where the rent was more reasonable. Our new address was 923 Hubbard. Once again we were close to school.. This time we lived right across the street from Riley School. This school had a crossing guard and Heminger's Grocery store nearby. Heminger's had a large well-stocked candy counter. Often, Dad would give us a penny and we would choose our treat from the vast assortment available at the store. This was not an easy task.

My fourth grade teacher's name was Miss Johnson. She introduced our class to Switzerland. I can still see the artistic offerings from our class depicting the Alps all around the room. Riley was an old school. The old wooden floors were polished to a dull shine, and each classroom had a cloak closet at the back of the room.

Miss Scott was my fifth grade teacher.

Fifth grade was the year that I first experienced being in a track meet. We all practiced running and jumping for weeks before the May track meet. We competed against other grade schools during the last week of school. I remember the excitement of the occasion. I don't remember which school won. I think all the schools had moments of glory. Anyway, the fun was in the anticipation.

One of the special treats in fifth grade was having Miss Scott read a chapter from a book to us every day after noon recess. There was no hot lunch program in those days. Most of the students lived close enough that they went home for lunch. Those who lived farther away brought their lunches. I had to go just across the street to eat lunch at home.

My fifth grade year was a time of new experiences-some sad and puzzling. Two of my classmates died that year. Bobby Keller had some sickness and died from that. None of us knew what it was-nor did we ask. Buddy Casey's death was more worrisome. Buddy was murdered during the summer after fifth grade. He was found in his home with a belt around his neck hanging from a doorknob. That murder was never solved. One time in sixth grade Buddy's cousin Patsy burst into tears when the penmanship teacher had us practicing on k's and I's and used the word kill for practice. It seems like a poor word to use in any case. Of course, in this case, it was an even worse choice.

In those days autograph books were the fad. We collected verses and messages from classmates in our books. If Buddy had lived, I probably wouldn't remember this incident, but since he didn't it sticks in my mind. When I asked Buddy to sign my book, he said he didn't know what to write. I said, " Just write a little poem or something." I was thinking of something like "Roses are red, Violets are blue." He made up a poem and it went like this:

*Bud, Bud, fell in a pud
Get up, Bud.*

Our years at 923 Hubbard were eventful. I was learning about all kinds of things that I really preferred not to know about. That is where I first heard of tornadoes. The occasion was a tornado warning which came while I was playing with my friend and classmate on the other side of our block. Her mother told me there was a cyclone (aka tornado) coming and said I'd better get home. I didn't exactly know why, but I followed directions.

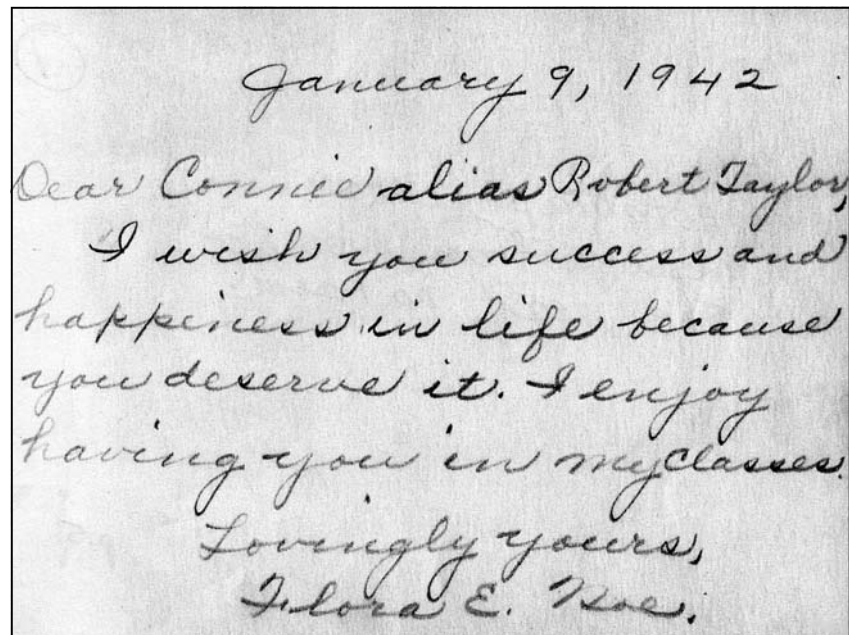
In our back yard on Hubbard Street we had a chicken pen and chickens. We also had a bag swing, and we were once again blessed with an alley. The people on our block who had the nicest yard were named Mr. and Mrs. Piller. On more than one occasion, we would see a dead neighborhood pet in their yard. Rumor had it that any animal who trespassed into their yard would be poisoned. Back in those days, folks didn't resort to lawsuits and police calls for such things. I wish that they would have. Our little terrier Mickey became very sick one day and died that same day. I'm sure Mickey died as a result of poison furnished by Piller the Killer (as Mr. Piller was known in the neighborhood).

After fifth grade, I went to Central School which was downtown. Sixth graders from all over town went to the same school. All summer I looked forward to this rite of passage and planned to celebrate the occasion by having a Lotta Malt from Fairmont Ice Cream store on my way home the first day of school. The only problem was, I had no money and forgot to tell my dad ahead of time that this was my plan. Oh, well. Even without the special treat I felt very grown-up. I was no longer in grade school.

It was at Central School that I met two teachers I will

never forget and both of them are remembered for unhappy reasons. Miss Praeger, my home room teacher, wrongly took away a citizenship point from me for some alleged infraction. This caused me to receive a small "C" for citizenship instead of a large "C" at awards time. Even now I can remember the disappointment I suffered, and of course I complained to any who would listen the time-worn lament: "It isn't fair!"

The other teacher who let me down was Miss Noe, the English teacher. She found a silly note I had written to Lana Turner (a popular movie star) from Robert Taylor (another popular movie star). In her search for the perpetrator of this deed, she began reading the note to every class. Several students suggested that it sounded like something I might have done. It wasn't till I went to her and admitted it that she quit reading it to all the classes. I think she got some kind of malevolent pleasure from this, but I found it very embarrassing and when I became a teacher years later I tried very hard to avoid embarrassing my students.



Autograph album message from Miss Noe. She meant no harm.

Seventh grade was my favorite grade. One reason was that I was no longer in Central with the likes of Miss Praeger and Miss Noe, but the main reason was that now I was old enough to have special girlfriends. My best friends were Maxine Ericksten and Pat McMullen. We had many good times together. In seventh grade, the students were divided into sections. Section 1 had the band and orchestra kids; Section 2 had good students who weren't in band or orchestra. Sections 3 and 4 were more of the same, and Section 5 was for students who had learning or behavior problems. I was in Section 2. I played first base and was captain of our Section 2 girls' baseball team. One of the highlights of our year was capturing the championship in the intramural contest among all the girls' teams. We were so scared of Section 5, but we managed to triumph over them.

Eighth grade was the year that my friends and I started to wear lipstick, did some babysitting (so we had a little money to spend), and began to go to boy/girl parties. I had a crush on Fred Hart. When he had a party at his house, I wore my new blouse with daisies around the neckline. Each daisy was buttoned onto the blouse and the button was the center of each flower. At the house parties that year, we played spin the bottle and danced to records. When the party was over, the boys walked us home. Usually, one of my friends was staying overnight with me so we were always with a group. We had many good times that year.

In the spring, a contest to select a Typical Boy and a Typical Girl from the eighth grade was held at school. Each day we would vote with the number of candidates being reduced each time. Near the end of the contest the girls still in the running were Kay Shelton, Nancy Meyers, and me. The next time there were just two of us, Kay Shelton and me. On the day of eighth grade graduation, I looked at my program and found out that Kay had won the contest. I was disappointed, but still



Virginia, Jim, and Connie at 900 Stone.

felt good and surprised that I had done so well.

Once again it was time for us to move. We moved to a house at 900 Stone street. We were no longer so close to school, but now we were old enough to walk to school with no problems. My friend Colletta Lou Condit who had lived near us on Hubbard Street once again lived near us on Stone Street. She was a couple of years younger than I was, but since she was an only child she seemed more mature than her years. We were great friends, and when I found out her family was moving to New Mexico, I was sad. However, I was consoled by the fact that her parents and my parents agreed that I could go visit her for two weeks in New Mexico.

The summer after 8th grade, my family took me to Pratt, Kansas, and put me on the train to go to Carizozo, New Mexico. Armed with my sack lunch, my suitcase, and a big/little book to read, I made the trip in great shape. Mother had warned me to not talk to any soldiers on the train. The year was 1942 and there were military men everywhere. When one asked me about my book, I answered in the shortest possible way. I'm sure he was just a lonely young man looking for some reading material, but I took my mother's warning seriously. When I got off the train in the dusty little town in New Mex-

ico, no one was there to meet me. It was only a few minutes till they showed up (but it seemed much longer). I felt much better after we drove to their house and Colletta's mother served a wonderful dinner of fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and gravy. That woman could cook! Colletta and I had a wonderful time exploring the land around the ranch, playing with her dog PeeWee (a Mexican chihuahua), and gabbing. We shared a room with her grandma, and we were so tired at the end of each day that the grandma's snoring was no problem.



Colletta Condit.

Later that summer, I had to have my tonsils out. Prior to this surgery, I had always been pretty skinny and I had quite a few colds. After the surgery, I was healthier. The surgery was

done at the hospital and I went home the same day. It took me a few weeks to get my strength back, but I had no ill effects from the surgery .

Now I was ready for my high school years. I was in 9th grade and my sister Virginia was a senior. I enjoyed walking to school with her. We lived about eight blocks from school. We met my friend, Mary Ann Brown, and Virginia's friend, Cora Schmalian, on the corner and the four of us walked together. We had many laughs and good times. For awhile one spring the fad was to roller skate to school. We enjoyed this.

One of the good things about my sophomore year was the class yell we gave whenever we had a school assembly. As freshmen, we boringly spelled out F R E S H M E N! Now we had a yell with more pizzazz: "Ricka chicka boom. Ricka chicka boom. Ricka chicka Ricka Chicka Boom Boom Boom. Wahoo Wah ! Wahoo Wah! Sophomores Sophomores Rah! Rah! Rah!"

During my sophomore year, I began to

take part in school activities. I joined school clubs and wanted to be in the band. I couldn't play any instruments (other than the piano by ear), but where there's a will, there's a way. I asked Mr. Sherrard, the band teacher, how I could get in the band. He gave me a few lessons on the snare drum and sent me home to practice on it. I imagine my family really appreciated hearing me practice the drum, but they didn't complain and I was soon a member of the band. I guess Mr. Sherrard knew I couldn't do too much damage with the drum, so he let me in. I enjoyed that a lot—especially our trips out of town.

I have many happy memories of my high school years. Best of all were my girlfriends. On Saturday afternoons a group of us would get together at one of our houses. We went everywhere together. We confided in each other. My best friends were Maxine Ericksten, Mary Ann Brown, Gerry Stoskopf, Elizabeth Capes, and Marilyn Blankenship. We have stayed in touch and stayed friends



High school friends.

over the years.

My friends and I often played tennis. We'd ride our bikes or hike to the city park to play. Another favorite activity was our "sunrise picnics" or "sunrise hikes". We'd set our alarm clocks for five a.m. and hike to the park to eat our sack lunches. Even now when I see any of these friends, they like to "complain" that I "made" them get up and go on these excursions. We had a favorite place to hike which we called Suicide Creek. We'd walk out east of town to a culvert which we

had named. Sometimes we'd walk around a country section of land. Once, we even invited one of our favorite teachers to go along on a hike in January. In retrospect, it comes as no surprise that she was "busy" that day. Most of us were also in Jobs Daughters. I moved up through the offices to be Senior Princess. We all enjoyed the meetings, the parties, and occasional trips out of town to conventions.

Church activities were important to me as I grew up. I went to church every Sunday and to MYF on Sunday nights. For awhile, some of us girls formed a church group which we called SOS club. That stood for Serving our Savior. I forget just what we were doing to serve. I think we were sewing something. One summer I went to Camp Carlisle (a Methodist church camp near Sterling, KS). I had a great time and enjoyed meeting boys and girls from other towns in Kansas. Another summer, Virginia and I both went to "Institute" at Southwestern College. We stayed in a college dorm and had Bible studies and other classes during the day. We had a few field trips—the most notable of which was a trip to a state institution for severely handicapped people. Word went through the dorm that we should not wear anything blue on this outing. We were solemnly told, "The nuts don't like blue." Despite the tactless



Methodist Youth Fellowship.

phrasing, we took the warning seriously.

One church related activity that I enjoyed was putting out a two-page mimeographed newspaper which we named "Spotlight". We had news of MYF members, jokes, and a schedule of upcoming activities. Of course we included the typical "gossip" column. The church employed a deaconess by the name of Louise Dutcher. She was the chaperone for all these activities. Gerry and I took turns being the editor of the newspaper. I think we were the only ones who worked on it; we'd go to the church after school to type the paper and run off copies of it on the mimeograph machine.

One summer Virginia and her two best friends, Eileen and Pat, had a summer carnival in our back yard. They named their carnival El Contento and had a Spanish theme. They had food for sale and they performed by singing a trio rendition of "La Cucaracha".

In high school, we started to date. Usually, we double dated. My first boyfriend was named Art Larkin and his best friend, Bill Keeler, dated my best friend, Gerry. It wouldn't have been nearly as much fun if we hadn't gone together in our foursome. My next boyfriend was Joe Edd Sheldon. I went with him for a long time—even into my college years. He went to our church. He played football and had a great sense of humor. He liked creative writing and one time he won a poetry contest sponsored by the Kansas Author's Society and I won an honorable mention in short story writing. We two along with our journalism teacher got to go to Larned, a town twenty five miles away, to a luncheon meeting of the Society to read our winning selections.

But life is not all fun and games—even in high school. I was now old enough to get a job other than babysitting. My first job was as a cleaning person at our hospital. My friend Maxine and I applied for work and that is what

we got. We had to get up early and take the city bus to work. When we took the job, we thought our pay was going to be \$2.50 per week. You can imagine our delight when we found out it was \$2.50 per day. I remember the thrill of that first payday and how I went to Gunn's Clothing Store and bought a red Janzen swimsuit and a pair of aqua colored corduroy shorts with my pay. Working at the hospital was scary sometimes. In those days, polio was still a scourge in the land. No one had figured out what caused polio. If we had to pass by the isolation ward, we'd run and hold our breaths. Another scary thing about our jobs was the nuns who supervised us. Once, when we had left work early, I was punished the next day by having to scrub the stairs. Somehow the nuns had deduced that I was the culprit behind our early leave-taking. Occasionally, we'd meet in a broom closet for a brief respite from our duties. One time, we were invited to witness a ceremony at the next door convent as some young women were inducted into the convent, a first step to becoming nuns.

My next job (the following summer) was at Dillon's Grocery Store. Our neighbor, Mr. Osborne, was manager of Dillon's. He hired all of us. Virginia worked there as a checker, Jim was a carry-out boy, and I worked in the Produce Department. I'd wrap and weigh a head of lettuce or other produce and mark the price on it for a customer. One time an old man accused me of charging too much. I was upset and beginning to learn that working with the public has its pitfalls. Overall, though, I really enjoyed serving the customers.

One sad day when I was at work at Dillon's will always stay in my memory. That day one of my classmates came in and told me that our classmate Conan Gilcrease had been working on an oil well, his summer job, and had been killed in a fire in an accident on the job. Once again tragedy came to one of my classmates.



*Dillon's store picnic.
Virginia, Jim Barnhill, Connie.*

At the Dillon's store picnic in Hutchinson, Virginia and I both got terrible sunburns.. Virginia was so sick with hers that she had to stay home from work. I quit this job when it was time to go back to school in the fall.

My next job was as a sales clerk at Home Appliance. I continued to work at this store during summer time and at Christmas vacations for several years during college and even after I was married when Bill had to go to ROTC Summer camp.

About this time, my parents bought a country school house and converted it into a comfortable home for our family. Our new address was 3211 Forest . It was in a nice part of town.

Music was a big part of my teenage years. I sang in the school glee clubs and in a group called Eight Slick Chicks. This group sang for church groups and civic clubs who needed free entertainment. When Great Bend celebrated their 75th anniversary called the Jubilesta, we performed at the program. I sang in a capella choir and glee club at school, but one of my fondest memories is that of Virginia and me sitting in the porch swing at our house singing familiar songs in harmony. Virginia and I sang in several different church choirs depending on where our friends were going to church at the time. I

remember singing in the Presbyterian and Congregational choirs. I don't think the Methodists ever let young people sing in their choir so we didn't sing there.

That was what my school years were like. In May, I was graduated in the top 10 percent of my class and was inducted into National Honor Society, Music Honor Society, and Quill and Scroll.

In the fall of 1948, I went to Kansas State College (now University) at Manhattan KS. I moved into VanZile Hall women's dormitory. The dorm was beautiful, but it seemed very large to me. I was assigned to room #303 with two total strangers, Alice Boone and Virginia Polson for roommates. We got along, but we were all three very different from each other. I made friends with Jean Beck who lived in a nearby room. It was hard to get acquainted with others because the dorm was so big. VanZile was the home to over 300 women students. I was very homesick. I had decided that I would not go home until Thanksgiving. I'm afraid if I had gone home I might not have come back as I was pretty miserable. However, it wasn't all bad.

I liked my classes and after awhile I did get acquainted with others in the dorm. I liked our mealtimes when we gathered in the dining hall and sang grace and other songs and were expected to behave in prescribed ways. We were instructed about table manners. When we were in the living areas of the dorm we were expected to stand when our housemother entered the room. I learned many new things that semester. By second semester I was much happier. I had found some friends who liked to take hikes with me. I loved the town of Manhattan. I liked rainy days. At the end of second semester I was elected to be an officer in VanZile Hall for the next year, but

by then I had decided to go through rush week the next fall.

In the fall of 1949, I pledged Alpha Xi Delta sorority, and I was assigned to live in the so-called "cave." It was the room most removed from all others on the third floor. I was told that I was assigned to that room because it was thought that I would be most likely to get out and visit the others throughout the house. I did, and maybe as a result I



Sorority friends: Joan, Connie, Mary Ann, Lois, Carolee, Martha.

was elected president of my pledge class. I loved living in the house. All the girls left the doors to their rooms open. This was a difference that was in stark contrast to the huge dorm where I lived before. A similarity, however, was the mealtime activities. We sang some great songs and had much conviviality. On Friday nights, pledges were given extemporaneous entertainment assignments at dinner time. It was fun. Pledges had duties to perform during the week such as taking the housemother to church or being assigned to wake up girls in the morning. In the spring our pledge class was initiated and our pledge days were over.

I decided to follow the example set by Virginia and stay out of college for a semes-

ter to earn money to help with college expenses. I stayed out the first semester of my junior year. I had continued to work at Home Appliance store in the summers and at vacation time so once again I worked there during this semester.

This was a very special semester to me. After being accustomed to the hectic pace of being a student, I finally had time to savor the beauty of the season. I liked the people I worked with, I completed a correspondence course, and I attended church and a Singles group from church. I met a couple of nice guys that I dated. It was a wonderful semester. I went to Manhattan for a football weekend during the fall. The sorority called and asked if I would take the office of treasurer when I came back to school second semester. I agreed as it was a paying job and I liked that.

The first week back for second semester, I had a blind date with Bill. He and I continued to date through the semester, through the summer, and during our senior year. Then Bill gave me his fraternity pin and asked me to marry him. I said yes. Bill asked whether I thought he should apply for vet school or enlist in the navy. Together we decided on vet school, so he finished his requirements for a bachelor's degree and met the requirements for admission to vet school in one semester. He was very busy taking 20 hours of classwork.

After graduation, I spent the summer working at Home Appliance in Great Bend and Bill worked in construction at the Kerwin Dam with his brother-in-law Tony Schulmeyer. Bill lived with his sister Anna Marie, Tony, and their son Tommy that summer. One summer weekend on August 9, 1952, when Bill had come to Great Bend to visit me, he received a phone call with the news that Tony, Anna Marie, and Tommy had been in a car accident and Bill was to come to the Hays, KS, hospital. His

parents were already there. I went with him, and when we got there at about 9 p.m. we were told that Anna Marie had been killed in the accident. The three people in the other car which had crashed head on into Schulmeyer's car were also killed. They had been drunk and had crossed over the middle of the road on the crest of a small hill. Tony had a broken jaw and Tommy had a broken leg. I stayed with Bill's Uncle Oliver and Aunt Marie at a Hays motel that night and went to Lucas the next day to help out. After Anna Marie's funeral and after Tommy was released from the hospital, Bill's mom and dad took him home to the farm and took care of him while Tony started his coaching duties.

Bill had given me an engagement ring about this time and we decided we would be married in June of the next year. I went to Glasco, Kansas, to my first teaching assignment and Bill went back to Manhattan to start vet school. In Glasco, I shared an apartment with Betty Dreher who was in her mid-thirties and taught business courses in the Glasco High School. Our apartment had a living room/kitchen and a bedroom. We shared a bathroom with the other apartment on the second floor of the Carlisle's house. Luckily, the other apartment was not occupied so we had the bathroom to ourselves. Betty and the art teacher, Jo Grimes, and I were friends. Betty had a car but was just learning to drive. That worked out okay since I could drive but didn't have a car. We liked taking little trips such as going to Beloit for dinner. I often went to Manhattan on the bus on weekends to visit Bill. Sometimes he came to Glasco for the weekend.

During the week, I spent my time with Betty and Jo. We were an odd threesome. Betty was straight-laced and prudish. Jo was rowdy and wild. At the end of the school year, Jo met a guy she liked, got pregnant, and got married. I think Betty

taught there another year. I went back to Great Bend to get ready for my wedding.

On June 7, 1953, Bill and I were married in the Methodist Church in Great Bend, KS. Virginia was my matron of honor and Gayle Vernon was Bill's best man. We spent a week in Colorado for our honeymoon. We spent time in Colorado Springs and in Denver and enjoyed the beautiful mountain scenery. At

the end of the week we went to our trailer home in Manhattan, Kansas. Our address was West Campus Courts #1. We both had jobs for the summer. At the end of the summer, Bill started vet school and I started teaching in a rural school at Stockdale, Kansas.

Thus ends the first chapter of *My Story*.



Bill and Connie at pinning ceremony.